



Introducing
Tucker Wayne and Kane

TRACKER

A Short Story Exclusive

**JAMES
ROLLINS**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TRACKER

James Rollins



WILLIAM MORROW

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Contents

TRACKER

An Excerpt from Bloodline

Horn of Africa Map

Notes from the Historical Record

Notes from the Scientific Record

Summer 1134

Fourth of July

FIRST: Present Day

1

2

About the Author

By James Rollins

Copyright

About the Publisher

TRACKER

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He knew she was being hunted.

Seated at a chilly bistro table, wrapped in a woolen jacket, Tucker Wayne watched the woman hurry across the icy medieval plaza known as *Szentháromság tér*, or Trinity Square. The blonde, early twenties, glanced over her shoulder one too many times. She wore sunglasses even though most of the plaza was already thick with shadows as the sun set. Her crimson silk scarf had been tugged too high over her chin, not because she was cold; such thin material offered little practical protection against the chilly gusts that swept the plaza. Also, she walked too fast compared with the others ambling around the heart of the city's Royal Castle District, a major tourist hub for Budapest.

The army had trained him to maintain such diligence, to watch for the unusual amid the ordinary. When he'd been a captain with the army rangers, he and his partner had served as the unit's trackers through two tours in Afghanistan—for search-and-rescue operations, for extraction, for hunting down targets of acquisition. In the outlying districts and villages of Afghanistan, the difference between life and death was not so much about rifles, Kevlar, and the latest risk assessments as it was about noting the rhythms of the environment, the normal ebb and flow of life, and watching for anything out of the ordinary.

Like now.

The woman didn't belong here. Even the brightness of her clothing was out of place: the ivory knee-length coat, the red shoes that matched her scarf and hat. Among a winter crowd dressed in browns and blacks or tans and grays, she stood out.

Not wise when you were being hunted.

As he watched her nervous progress across the square, he cradled the cup of hot coffee between his palms. He wore a pair of gloves with the fingertips cut out of them. Other patrons of the pastry shop gathered inside the small space, where it was warm and crowded at this hour. They were bellied up to the counter or perched at small window-side tables. He was the only one banished to the outdoor patio at the edge of the cold square.

He and his partner.

The compact shepherd, known as a Belgian Malinois, lay at his feet, the dog's muzzle resting on the tip of his boot, ready for any command. Kane had served alongside him through two tours in Afghanistan. They'd worked together, eaten together, even bunked together.

Kane was as much a part of his body as his own arm or leg.

When Tucker left the service, he took Kane with him.

Since then, Tucker had been adrift in the world, intending to stay lost, taking the occasional odd job to support himself—and then moving on. He liked it that way. After all he had seen in Afghanistan, he needed new horizons, new vistas, but mostly, he had a drive to keep moving.

With no family attachments in the States, he no longer needed a home.

It came with him.

He reached down and ran his fingers through the dog's dense black-and-tan fur. Kane's muzzle lifted. Dark brown eyes, flecked with gold, stared up at him. It was one of the unique features of domesticated dogs—*they studied us as much as we studied them.*

He matched that gaze and gave a small nod—then flicked his eyes to the square. He wanted his partner to be ready as the woman crossed toward them, about to skirt past the outdoor patio.

He scanned the flow of humanity into and out of the plaza as it wound around the towering statue in the center of the square. Its

Baroque façade was covered in marble figures, climbing skyward, toward a brilliant gold star. It represented those in the city who had escaped the Black Plague during the eighteenth century.

As the woman neared, he kept a close eye on anyone staring toward her. There were a few. She was a woman who naturally turned heads: slender, curvaceous, with a fall of blond hair to the middle of her back.

At last, across the plaza, he spotted her hunter—or rather, *hunters*.

A mountain of a man, flanked by two smaller figures, entered from a street to the north. They were all dressed in trench coats. The leader was black haired, well over six feet, hugely muscled, and, from the prominent pocking over his face, a chronic abuser of anabolic steroids.

Tucker noted bulges under the trench coats that suggested concealed weapons.

The woman didn't notice the group, her eyes glancing right over them.

So she knew someone might be looking for her, but she didn't have the skill or knowledge to pick them out. Yet she had the instinct to stay around other people.

She hurried past his location, a whiff of jasmine left in her wake.

Kane tilted his nose up to her scent.

She headed toward the doors of the massive Matthias Church, with its towering stone-laced gothic spire and fourteenth-century reliefs depicting the Virgin Mary's death. The doors were still open, waiting for the last of the day's tourists to straggle out. She headed inside, casting a final look around before ducking past the threshold.

Tucker finished his coffee, left a tip, and stood. He grabbed Kane's leash and exited just as the trio of hunters swept past. As he followed them, bundled in his jacket and coat, he heard the tallest of the three give quick orders in Hungarian.

Local thugs.

Tucker shadowed the group as they moved toward the church. One of the three glanced back at him, but Tucker knew what he would see.

A man in his late twenties, taller than average, sandy blond hair worn a little shaggy, walking a dog outfitted in a brown sweater. Tucker hid some of his muscled height by slumping his shoulders and hunching down. His clothing was already nondescript: worn jeans, a

battered olive green coat, a wool cap tugged low. He knew *not* to avoid eye contact—that raised as much suspicion as staring. So he merely nodded politely back and showed disinterest.

As the other turned around, Tucker touched his nose and ticked his finger toward the mountain of a man in the middle.

Acquire that one's scent.

Kane had a vocabulary of a thousand words, understood a hundred hand gestures, making the dog an extension of himself. The shepherd trotted forward, sniffing behind the man, close to his heels, nose near the edge of the trench coat.

Tucker pretended to ignore his partner's efforts, staring off across the square.

Once Kane secured what he needed, the dog dropped back and waited for the next command. His ears remained stiff, his tail high, expressing his alertness.

As the trio reached the church, more orders were passed brusquely in Hungarian, and the group split up, spreading out to cover the exits.

Tucker stepped over to a park bench, crouched down next to Kane, and tied the end of the leash loosely around its iron leg but unclipped the other end. He merely tucked it in place behind Kane's collar, making it look as if the dog were secured there.

Next, he slid his fingers under the brown sweater to the camouflaged K9 Storm tactical vest. It was waterproof and Kevlar reinforced. His fingers flicked on the built-in camera and snaked up its fiber-optic lens, smaller than a pencil eraser, hiding it between the dog's pricked ears.

"Stay," he ordered.

Kane sat in the deep shadows of the church, just another dog waiting for the return of its master.

With a final scratch at his partner's ear, ensuring the Bluetooth earpiece was secure, Tucker leaned forward, bringing his face close to his dog's. It was a ritual of theirs.

"Who's a good boy?"

Kane reached his cold nose forward and touched his.

That's right. You are.

A tail thumped good-bye as Tucker straightened. Turning, he watched the huge man stride toward the church's main entrance with

the full confidence of a hunter whose prey had been trapped.

He followed, freeing his modified cell phone—courtesy of the military, as was the tactical vest, both stolen when he had left the service. For that matter, so was Kane. But after what had happened at that village outside Kabul . . .

He shied from that painful memory.

Never again . . .

His whole unit had helped him escape with the dog.

But that was another story.

He switched on the phone, tapped a few icons on the screen. Then a video appeared: of his backside, walking away, the feed coming from Kane's camera.

All was in order.

Tucker pocketed the phone and followed the tall hunter through the doors of the church. Inside, massive spiral pillars held up a cavernous space. All around, the plastered walls displayed a frenzy of brilliant golden frescoes depicting the deaths of Hungarian saints, brought to life by the flickering of candles throughout the nave. Farther down, a series of chapels opened off to the sides, containing a few sarcophagi and a museum of medieval carvings. The entire place smelled vaguely of incense and mildew.

Tucker easily spotted the target, again standing out in her ivory coat. She sat in a pew halfway down the length of the nave, her head bowed.

The hulk of a man took a post near the entrance, leaning against the wall, preparing to wait her out. Clearly, the group was afraid to nab her in front of witnesses and was biding its time before making a move. With the sun almost down and the church emptying out, it would not be a long wait.

Unless Tucker did something about it.

He slipped past the wide bulk of the man, noting the earpiece in his left ear, then continued into the main church. He moved down to the pew where the woman had parked herself and slipped in next to her. She moved a few inches farther down the bench, barely glancing his way. She had taken off her hat and sunglasses in respect for the church. He reached up and did the same with his cap.

Her hair shone like gold in the candlelight. Her eyes, as she

glanced at him, were a watery blue. In her hands, she fondled a cell phone, as if unsure whom to call—or maybe she was hoping for a call.

“Do you speak English?” he asked softly.

Even the whisper made her flinch, but after a long pause, she answered curtly, “Yes, but I prefer not to be bothered.”

She spoke the words as if she had said them countless times before. Her accent was distinctly British, as was her reserve as she slid a full foot away from him.

He knelt down in the pew, offering a less intimidating pose, bowing his head to his hands as he spoke. “I wanted to warn you that three men are following you.”

She tensed, looking ready to bolt.

“I think you should pray,” he said, motioning her down.

“I’m Jewish.”

“And I’m only here to help you. If you want it.”

Again that calculating pause, but she slipped gently to her knees.

He whispered without facing her. “They are watching each door out of here.” When she tried to glance back, he tightened his voice. “Don’t.”

She bowed her forehead to her hands. “Who are you?”

“Nobody. I saw those armed men following you. I saw how scared you looked—”

“I don’t need your help.”

He sighed. “Okay. I offered.”

He began to stand up, knowing he had done as much as his conscience demanded. He couldn’t help those who were too proud or stubborn to accept it.

She reached low and pinched the sleeve of his jacket. “Wait.” When he settled back to his knees next to her, she asked, “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You can’t know for sure.” He shrugged. “Either you do or you don’t.”

She stared at him, and he met her gaze. “I remember you. You were sitting at that patio with a dog.”

“*That* you noticed. Not the armed thugs trailing you.”

She turned away. “I like dogs. She was pretty.”

He smiled into his raised palms, warming up to this woman. “*His*

name is Kane.”

“Sorry. Then *he* was handsome.” She moved a little closer, sounding calmer. “But what can *you* do?”

“I can get you out of here. Away from them. What you want to do from there is up to you.”

That was one of his specialties.

Extraction.

She glanced over to him, swallowing hard. “Then please, help me.”

He held out his hand. “Then let’s get out of here.”

“How?” she asked, surprised. “What about—?”

His hand closed over hers, silencing her. Her palm burned like an ember in his. “Just stay close to me.”

He drew her back out of the pew, letting go of her hand but motioning her to stay behind him. In his other hand, he held a black KA-BAR fighting knife hidden alongside his leg. He had slipped the blade out of its ankle sheath as he knelt. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use it.

He led her away from the main entrance toward a smaller exit on the south side of the church. He glanced sidelong toward the tall man. The hunter was already swinging away, touching his ear, plainly alerting the man guarding this door. Then his hulking form vanished out of sight as he swung around the church to join his comrade. They were likely planning on ambushing her once she stepped outside.

Once he was gone, Tucker abruptly turned, caught the woman around the waist, and swung her around.

“What are you—?”

“Change of plans,” he said. “We’re going out the other way.”

Without letting go of her waist, he hurried her toward the *north*-facing portal, hoping that the radioed message from the big man was drawing all eyes to the south, expecting her to exit there.

Once at the door, he paused. He held her back and checked his cell phone. Video bloomed to light on the tiny screen. Though the sun had set by now, the view through the night-vision camera was grainy but bright. It showed the plaza and the main entrance to the church as Kane stared toward where his partner had vanished, waiting patiently.

Good boy.

Satisfied, he stepped toward the exit, hoping the guard posted out

there had been tricked into retreating to the other side of the church, along with their leader.

And apparently his ruse worked, unfortunately not to his benefit.

The door swung open as Tucker reached for it.

The third hunter barged inside, plainly intending to take a shortcut *across* the church rather than *around* it, planning to bring up the rear behind his fleeing quarry.

Both Tucker and the man were equally caught off guard.

Tucker reacted first as the hunter's eyes spotted the woman in the ivory coat and struggled to comprehend how she could be there.

Using that momentary confusion, Tucker lunged and barreled into the man with his shoulder, driving him back out the door and into a narrow dark alley. He slammed him against the brick wall on the far side, driving an elbow into his solar plexus, hard enough for the air to burst from his chest.

The man gasped and slumped, but he had enough wits to paw for a hidden weapon. Tucker spun, swinging his arm with all the strength in his shoulder. He struck the hilt of his KA-BAR dagger against the man's temple—and drove him to his knees, where he fell limply on his face.

Tucker quickly searched him. The woman stepped out, too, smartly closing the door to the church, looking terrified.

For the moment, with the church mostly deserted, no one seemed to note the attack. He confiscated a FÉG PA-63 semiautomatic pistol, used commonly by the Hungarian police and military. He also found an I.D. folder topped with a badge and flipped it open, recognizing the man's face, but not the badge, though it looked official. Across the top it read *Nemzetbiztonsági Szakszolgálat*, and at the bottom were three letters: NSZ.

The woman gasped upon seeing it, recognizing it.

That can't be good.

He stared up at her.

"He's with the Hungarian national security service," she said.

Tucker took a deep breath and stood. He had just cold-cocked a member of the Hungarian FBI. What had he gotten himself into? Right now, the only answers lay with this woman.

He knew he didn't want to be found crouched over this

unconscious form, especially by the guy's teammates. People still had a tendency to disappear in this former Soviet Bloc country, where corruption continued to run rampant.

And, at the moment, was he on the *right* side of the law or the *wrong*?

As he stood, he studied the scared eyes of the woman. Her fear seemed genuine, based on confusion and panic. He remembered how she had crossed the plaza, offering so open a target. Whoever she was, she wasn't some criminal mastermind.

He had to trust his instincts. One of the reasons he had been paired with Kane was his high empathy scores. Military war dog handlers had a saying—*It runs down the lead*—describing how emotions of the pair became shared over time, binding them together as firmly as any leash. The same skill allowed him to read people, to pick up nuances of body language and expression that others might miss.

He stared at the woman and recognized she was in real trouble.

Whatever was happening was not her fault.

Committed now, he took her hand and headed quickly for a back alley. His hotel was not far off—the Hilton Budapest, right around the corner. Once he got her stashed somewhere safe, he could figure out what was really going on and do something to end it.

But first, he needed more information. He needed ears and eyes in the field—and in this case, a nose, too.

He recovered his cell phone, tapped a button, and radioed a command.

K*ane hears the word in his ear, spoken with authority.*

“TRACK.”

He stands and tugs free of the leash, ignoring the clatter of the clasp on the pavement behind him. He slinks behind the bench to where the shadows will hide him. He lifts his nose to the night, senses swelling outward, filling in the world around him with information beyond mere sight, which is keen enough in the dark.

The ripeness of garbage rises from a pail . . .

The tang of old urine wafts from the stone wall . . .

The smoky exhaust of cars tries to wash through it all . . .

But he stays focused, picking out the one scent he was told to follow. It

is a blazing trail through all else: the smell of leather and sweat, the salt of skin, the musky dampness held trapped beneath the long coat as the man walked in front of him.

He follows that trail now through the air as it hangs like a lighted beacon through the miasma of other scents. He hunts along it from the bench to the stone corner, staying to shadows. He watches the prey come running, circling back into view.

He slinks low.

The prey and another man rush past him, blind to him.

He waits, waits, waits—only then does he follow.

Belly near the ground, he moves from shadow to shadow until he spots the prey bent over another man. They pick him up, search around, then head away.

He flows after them, a ghost upon their trail.

Tucker hurried the woman through the main entrance to the Hilton Budapest. The historic structure was just steps away from the Matthias Church. They had no trouble reaching it unseen.

He rushed her into the lobby, struck again by the mix of modern and ancient that typified this city. The hotel incorporated sections of a thirteenth-century Dominican monastery, integrating a pointed church tower, a restored abbey, and gothic cellars. The entire place was half modern hotel and half museum. Even the entrance they passed through was once the original façade of a Jesuit college, dating back to 1688.

He was allowed a room here with Kane because of a special international military passport that declared the dog to be a working animal. Kane even had his own rank—major, one station higher than Tucker. All military war dogs were ranked higher than their handlers. It allowed any abuse of the dogs to be a court martial offense: *for striking a superior officer*.

And Kane deserved every bit of his rank and special treatment. He had saved hundreds of lives over the course of his tours of duty. They both had.

But now they had another duty: to protect this woman and discover what they had stumbled into.

Tucker led her across the lobby and up to his guest room: a single

with a queen-sized bed. The room was small, but the view looked off to the Danube River that split the city into its two halves: Buda here and Pest across the river.

He pulled out the chair by the desk and offered her a seat, while he perched on the edge of the bed. He glanced to the video feed and saw that Kane continued to track the two men, now carrying their third teammate, groggy and slung between them. The group threaded through a series of narrow winding streets.

He kept the phone on his knee as he faced her. “So maybe now you can tell me how much trouble I’m in, Miss—?”

She tried to smile but failed. “Barta. Aliza Barta.” Tears suddenly welled, as the breadth of events finally struck her. She looked away. “I don’t know what’s going on. I came from London to meet my father—or rather *look for him*. He is a professor at the Budapest University of Jewish Studies.”

Aliza glanced back at him to see if he knew the university.

When he could only give her a blank expression, she continued, some family pride breaking through her tears. “It’s one of the most distinguished universities of rabbinical studies, going back to the mid-1800s. It’s the oldest institution in the world for training and graduating rabbis.”

“Is your father a rabbi?”

“No. He is a historian, specifically researching Nazi atrocities, with a special emphasis on the looting of Jewish treasures and wealth.”

“I’ve heard about attempts to find and return what was stolen.”

She nodded. “A task that will take decades. To give you some scale, the British Ministry that I work for in London estimates that the Nazis looted \$27 trillion from the nations they conquered. And Hungary was no exception.”

“And your father was investigating these crimes on Hungarian soil?” Tucker began to get an inkling of the problem here: missing historian, lost Nazi treasures, and now the Hungarian national security service involved.

Someone had found something.

“For the past decade he had been researching one specific theft. The looting of the Hungarian National Bank near the end of the war. A Nazi SS officer—*Oberführer* Erhard Bock—and his team absconded

with thirty-six cases of gold bullion and gems valued today at \$92 million. According to reports at the time, it was all loaded onto a freighter steaming up the Danube, headed to Vienna, but the party was bombed by fighter planes, and the treasure was jettisoned overboard, near where the Morava River joins the Danube.”

“And this treasure was never found.”

“Which struck my father as odd, since this theft was so well known, as was its fate. And the mouth of the Morava River is quite shallow that time of year, made even shallower by a two-year-old drought at the time. To my father, it seemed like *someone* would have found those heavy crates before the river mud claimed them.”

“But your father had another theory, didn’t he?”

Her bright eyes found his. “He thinks the treasure was never removed but hidden somewhere here in Budapest, stashed away until Erhard Bock considered it safe to return. Of course, that never happened, and on his deathbed, Bock hinted that the treasure was still here, claiming it was *buried below where even the claws of the Jewish dead could reach it.*”

Tucker sighed. “Like they say, once a Nazi, always a Nazi.”

“Then, two days ago, my father left me a cryptic message on my answering machine. Claimed he had made a breakthrough, from a clue he had discovered in some newly restored archive of the university’s library, something from the Prague cave.”

“The Prague cave?”

A nod, then Aliza explained, “The university library here contains the largest collection of Jewish theological and historical literature outside of Israel. But when German troops marched into the city, they immediately closed the rabbinical university and turned it into a prison. However, just before that happened, the most valuable manuscripts were hidden in an underground safe. But a significant number of important documents—three thousand books—were sent to Prague, where Adolf Eichmann planned the construction of a *Museum of an Extinct Race* in the old Jewish Quarter.”

“What a nice guy.”

“It took until the eighties for that cache of books to be found in a cave beneath Prague. They were restored to the library here after the fall of Communism in 1989.”

“And your father discovered something in one of those recovered books.”

She faced him, scrunching up her face. “In a *geology* text, of all places. On the message, he asked for my help with the British Ministry to obtain satellite data. Something my father in Hungary couldn’t easily access.”

“What sort of data?”

“Ground-penetrating radar information from a U.S. geophysical satellite. He needed a deep-earth scan of the district of Pest on the far side of the Danube.”

She glanced out the window toward the river as the spread of the city glowed against the coming night. “After I got that message, I tried calling him for more details, but I never heard back. After twenty-four hours, I got concerned and asked a friend to check his apartment. She reported that his flat had been ransacked, torn apart, and my father was missing. So I caught the first flight down here. I spent the day with the Hungarian police, but they had barely made any headway and promised to keep me informed. When I got back to my hotel room, I found the door broken open, and all my luggage searched, the room turned over.”

She glanced at him. “I didn’t know what else to do, didn’t know who to trust, so I fled and ended up at the square. I was sure someone was watching me, following me, but I thought maybe I was being paranoid. What could anyone want with me? What were they looking for?”

“Did you ever get that satellite information your father asked about?”

Her eyes widened, and her fingers went to the pocket of her coat. She removed a tiny USB flash drive. “Is this what they were looking for?”

“That, and possibly *you*. To use you as leverage against your father.”

“But why? Where could my father be?”

Tucker stared down at the cell phone on his knee. The party that Kane tracked had reached a parked sedan beyond the historical district. He saw Kane slow to a stop and slink back into the shadows nearby. The leader was easy to spot, leaning against the hood, a cell

phone pressed to his ear.

"Maybe these guys can tell us," he said. "Do you speak Hungarian?"

"I do. My family is from here. We lost most everyone following the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. But a few survived."

He patted the bed next to him. "Then listen to this."

She joined him and stared at the live feed on the screen. "Who is filming this?" She leaned closer. "Aren't those the men who were following me?"

"Yes."

She squinted up at him. "How—?"

"I had my dog track them. He's outfitted with a full surveillance package."

His explanation only deepened that pinched look. Rather than elaborating in more detail, he simply turned up the speakerphone so the audio from the video feed could be heard. Traffic noises and a whisper of wind ate most of the big man's words, but a few coarse phrases came through clearly.

Aliza cocked her head to the side, listening.

Tucker appreciated the long curve of her neck, the way her lips pursed ever so slightly as she concentrated.

"What are they saying?" he asked.

She spoke haltingly, listening and speaking at the same time. "Something about a cemetery. A *lost* Jewish cemetery." She shook her head as the man ended his call and vanished into the sedan. "He mentioned something at the end. A street. *Salgótarjáni*."

As the car pulled away, Tucker lifted the phone and pressed the button, radioing to Kane. "Return home. Good boy, Kane."

Lowering the phone, he watched Kane swing around and begin backtracking his way to the hotel. Satisfied, he turned to Aliza.

"I'm guessing that trio went rogue. Some faction heard about your father's inquiry, about his possible breakthrough in discovering that lost treasure trove. And they're trying to loot what was already looted."

"So what do we do? Go to the police?"

"I'm not sure that's the wisest plan, especially if you want your father back alive."

She paled at his words, but he didn't regret saying them. She had to know the stakes.

"Now that they've lost your trail, they'll run scared." He saw it even on that grainy footage. "The police are already investigating the disappearance of your father. Since they came after you, to use as leverage, that suggests he's still alive at the moment. But now with the police closing in and you nowhere to be found, they'll act rashly. I fear that if they can't get what they want by tonight, they'll kill your father to cover their tracks. Likewise, if he gives them what they want, the end result may be the same."

"So there's no hope."

"There's always hope. They're scared and will be more apt to make a mistake."

And be more dangerous, he added silently.

"Then what do we do?"

"We find out where they took your father. That street you mentioned. Do you know where that's located?"

"No. I don't know the city that well."

"I've got a map."

He retrieved it and spread it on the bed.

She leaned next to him, shoulder to shoulder, her jasmine perfume distracting. "Here it is," she said. "*Salgótarjáni* Street."

He ran a finger along the dead-end street. "It lies near the center of Pest, and it looks like it runs adjacent to . . ." He read the name and looked at her. "Kerepesi Cemetery. Could that be the lost Jewish burial site you heard them talking about?"

"No. I don't see how. Kerepesi is the oldest cemetery in all of Hungary." She shifted her finger closer to the Danube. "This is the Jewish Quarter, where you'll find most of our burial plots. It's a good three miles away from Kerepesi Cemetery."

"Then I'll have to take Kane and check out that street myself."

"It's too dangerous." She touched his arm. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You don't have to ask. If I don't end this, they'll come after me, too. That guy I knocked down in the alley will know you weren't alone. I'd rather not spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for a rogue agent from the Hungarian NSZ."

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“Sorry. Kane and I work alone. You’ll be safer here.”

She blocked him when he made a move toward the door. “You don’t speak the language. You don’t know what my father looks like. And you don’t know anything about the city. It’s *my* father’s life that’s in danger. I’m not going to sit idly by, hoping for the best. That didn’t work so well for my people in the past.”

She was ready to argue, but he shrugged. “You had me at *You don’t speak the language*. Let’s go.”

Tucker shared the backseat with Aliza as the taxi swept along the arched magnificence of the Chain Bridge as it spanned the Danube. She sat in the middle, between him and Kane. The shepherd spent most of the ride with his nose pushed out the crack in the window, his tail thumping happily.

Beside him, Aliza stroked Kane’s shoulder, which probably contributed to much of the tail-thumping. At least the presence of the dog had helped calm her. The tension in her body, while still there, had softened a bit. Still, she clutched an old sweater of her father’s in her lap, her knuckles pale.

Upon exiting the hotel, they had stopped long enough to collect Kane, who had been dutifully waiting for them outside the entrance to the Hilton. They had also stopped along the way out of Buda to meet with a friend of Aliza’s father, one who was willing to sneak into the taped-off apartment and steal an article of clothing from the hamper in the closet. They needed her father’s scent. It was a risky move, but apparently no one was watching the place.

Still, Tucker kept an eye out for any tail as they left the bridge and headed into Pest, leaving Buda behind.

In another fifteen minutes, they reached the heart of this half of Budapest and skirted past the rolling park-like setting of Kerepesi Cemetery, with its massive mausoleums, acres of statuary, and hillsides of gravestones.

The taxi rolled to a stop at *Salgótárjáni* Street, on the border of the cemetery. Aliza spoke a few words of Hungarian with the driver, who’d spent most of the cab ride eyeing Kane with suspicion. Aliza paid him, handing over a couple extra bills for his trouble.

They all piled out and waited for the taxi to leave.

As it pulled away, Aliza turned to him. "What do we do now?"

"We will let Kane take point from here, but first I need to prep him."

He pointed to a dark park bench, well hidden and shadowed by an ancient oak. The entire street ahead looked overgrown and forgotten, densely forested with beech and birch, thick with broad-leaf bushes and tangles of wild roses. A few homes dotted the way, evident from a scatter of lights glowing through the trees. The road itself was crumbled and pitted, long forgotten.

He led her to the bench, and they sat down.

Kane came trotting up to them after lifting his leg on an old stump, claiming this street for himself. Tucker scuffled his scruff and shook the hidden tactical vest, making sure nothing rattled to give the dog away. From here, they needed as much stealth as possible. He thumbed on the camera, raised the lens, and checked the dog's earpiece.

"All suited up, buddy," Tucker said, nuzzling close. "Ready to hunt?"

A savage swipe of his tail answered that. His dark eyes shone in the shadows.

Aliza passed Tucker the wool sweater. Kane had already taken a good whiff of her father's scent, but it never hurt to reinforce it.

"Target," Tucker said as Kane snuffled deep into the woolen garment. As the dog lifted his nose free again, Tucker pointed down the tree-shrouded street. "Track and find."

The dog twisted and took off. In seconds, he vanished into the shadows as if he were never there.

Tucker stood, freeing his cell phone. He had donned his own earpiece and taped on a throat mike to communicate hands-free with the shepherd. In his ear, he heard the dog sniffing and softly panting, the sounds amplified by the sensitive microphones of the surveillance gear.

Trying one last time, Tucker turned to Aliza. "You could wait here. If we find anything—"

She looked temped but stood up. "I'm right behind you."

He nodded and checked on the stolen FÉG PA-63 pistol tucked into

the back of his belt. "Let's see what Kane can find."

They set off down the road. He kept them to the deeper shadows of the overgrown lane, avoiding the pools of light cast by the occasional brick houses. Not that such caution was overly necessary. He heard Kane, and with the aid of the camera, saw through the shepherd's eyes. The dog was as much an extension of his senses as he was a partner.

As they continued, other dogs barked in the distance, perhaps scenting the arrival of Kane. While humans had on average six million olfactory receptors in their noses, hunting dogs like Kane had three hundred million, which heightened their sense of smell a thousandfold, allowing them to scent a target from two football fields away.

Tucker kept one eye on the road ahead and an ear out for any noise behind him. All the while, he monitored Kane's progress as he crisscrossed and pursued any evidence of a scent trail through here. Tucker felt his perception widening, stretching to match that of his dog, blurring the line between them.

He became more keenly aware of Aliza: the smell of her skin, the tread of her heels, the whisper of her breath as it wheezed. He even felt the heat of her body on his back when she hovered close.

On the screen, Kane ran low across the street one more time, circling toward what appeared to be a dead end. There were no homes back here, and the forest seemed to grow thicker and taller, the trees even older. A brick archway appeared, half-buried in the woods, its façade cracked and gap-toothed. A rusted black iron gate blocked the way through that archway.

What lay beyond it?

As Kane approached, he swept the edge of the turnaround, staying hidden. A small caretaker's house abutted the archway, evident from the dark windows to one side. When Kane reached the gate, he sniffed along the lower edge—then his body stiffened, nose out, tail back.

The pointed posture silently heralded his partner's success.

Tucker turned and touched Aliza's arm. "Kane found your father's scent up ahead."

Her eyes widened with hope. She stepped forward, ready to move faster, but he held her in check, his fingers tightening on her arm.

“Just stay behind me.” He touched his throat mike and subvocalized to Kane. “Good boy. Stand down. Hide.”

On the screen, he watched Kane break from his position, wheel away, and slip into the shadows to the right of the archway.

Tucker led Aliza forward. As they reached the end of the road, all seemed quiet. He maneuvered her under a beech tree.

“I’m going to check on the gate,” he said. “See if it’s locked. You stay hidden until I give you the all-clear.”

She nodded, one hand rising nervously to her throat.

He then took Kane’s example and edged along the periphery of the turnaround versus going straight across, sticking to the deepest shadows. The moon was bright overhead, casting too much light.

He dropped low and kept out of direct sight of the windows of the cottage that merged with the bricked archway. Without raising any alarm, he reached the gate. He saw no chain and risked reaching out to push one side of the gate, but before he could do so, a twin set of lights—headlamps—blazed from beyond the gate, spotlighting and blinding him.

A familiar gruff voice called out of the darkness; unfortunately, it was in Hungarian. So Tucker decided to ignore it. He whipped to the side, yanking out the FÉG PA-63 pistol, and fired at the headlamps.

Return fire pinged off the gate and chewed into the bricks.

One headlamp blacked out in a shattering *pop* of glass.

Then the car came jamming forward.

Crap.

Tucker danced back out of the archway, diving to the side as the sedan came charging toward him. He shoulder-rolled clear, the gates banging open behind him as the huge black beast came blasting into the turnaround. Gunfire chased him into the forest’s edge. He ducked behind the bole of an old oak and caught his breath.

He subvocalized a command to Kane. “Stay hidden.”

He planned on doing the same.

Then that Hungarian voice yelled to him, heard above the growl of the idling engine. He risked a glance to the street. The back passenger door was ajar. He saw Aliza being dragged into the glow of the headlamp. The burst of the sedan must have caught her by surprise, the light reaching her hiding spot, exposing her.

The gruff Hungarian with the pocked face held her by the throat, a pistol at her temple. The man tried English this time. "You come now or woman dead!"

With no choice, Tucker stepped into the open, his hands high, the pistol hanging loosely from one finger.

"Toss gun!" he was ordered.

Tucker underhanded it toward the sedan. It skidded under the car.

"Come now!"

Now this should get interesting . . . which was never a good thing.

He joined Aliza, who cast him an apologetic look.

He shook his head. *Not your fault.*

After his body was given a cursory search, he and Aliza were forced at gunpoint toward the archway and the gate, now broken and hanging askew. The sedan backed up behind them, pushing them all forward.

Beyond the brick span, the forest grew even denser, overgrown with ivy and thick ferns. Graves and mausoleums looked tossed about like children's blocks. Many looked broken into, leaving gaping holes in the ground. Other markers had been toppled or leaned drunkenly against one another. Moss and lichen etched the white marble and stone. Mounds of leaf matter and broken deadfall obscured many of the rest.

Tucker glanced to Aliza.

He saw the recognition in her eyes.

The closest gravestone bore a deeply inscribed Star of David.

Here was the lost Jewish cemetery.

They were forced to the side, toward the caretaker's cottage. A small room in back glowed feebly with light seeping past heavy drapes.

As they neared it, a door opened and allowed that blaze to sweep over them.

A stranger stood there, a tall man with a skeletal frame and thick black-rimmed glasses. His eyes swept past Tucker and focused on Aliza.

She stumbled forward, then restrained herself. "Professor Csorba . . ."

So she knew this man.

“*Jó estét*, Miss Barta,” he greeted her. “I’m sorry this reunion is under such poor circumstances.”

He stepped clear of the doorway.

“Domonkos, bring our two guests inside.” The professor’s eyes finally found Tucker’s face. “I did not imagine the independent Miss Barta would hire a bodyguard. An oversight of mine, but no harm done in the end.”

The pock-faced hulk named Domonkos shoved Tucker toward the steps and through the door.

Inside, the cottage room was quaint, with a raw-hewn plank floor covered in thick but worn rugs, heavy wood beams strapped to a low ceiling, and a small hearth glowing with embers.

Tucker was forced against one wall, guarded over by Domonkos. One of the other two thugs took a post by a nearby window. The last vanished down a hall, likely to watch the street outside, ready to respond if the brief firefight drew any unwanted attention.

As he settled against the wall, Tucker smelled a familiar sourness to the air, coming from those shadowy spaces beyond this room. Somewhere back there, a body or two moldered and had begun to stink. Likely the original caretakers.

But not all of the bloodshed here was old.

Tied to a chair was an elderly man with a full head of gray hair. His face was bruised, one eye swollen, dried blood running in trails from both nostrils. When Tucker first stepped inside, that remaining eye had blazed with defiance—but no longer, not after the slim figure followed Tucker inside.

“Aliza!” he croaked out.

“Papa!” She rushed forward, collapsing on her knees at his side. Tears were already running down her face. She turned to the man who had greeted her. “How could you?”

“I’m afraid I have ninety-two million reasons why, my dear.”

“But you worked with my father for thirty years.”

“Yes, ten of those years under Communist rule, while your father spent that time in London, raising a family, enjoying the freedom of such a life.” The man’s voice rang with jealousy and pent-up fury. “You have no understanding of what *life* was like here, if you could call it that. I lost my Marja because they didn’t have enough

antibiotics. Then my brave little Lujza, living up to her name as *warrior*, was shot during a protest. I will not see this treasure handed back to the Hungarian government, one little better than before, with many of the same players in power. *Never!*"

"So you will take it for yourself?" Aliza asked, not backing down from his vehemence.

"And I will use it for good, to help the oppressed, to heal the sick."

"And what of my father?" she sobbed. "Will you heal him?"

"I will let him live. If he cooperates, if you do the same."

Fat chance, Tucker thought.

The same doubt shone from her face.

Csorba held out his palm. "I have contacts enough to know, Aliza, that you have obtained what your father asked. The satellite feed from the Americans."

"Don't do it . . ." her father forced out, though each syllable pained him.

She glanced over to her father, then looked at Tucker.

He recognized she had no choice. They'd search her, punish her, and in the end, they'd get what they wanted.

He lowered his chin, passing on his opinion—but also hiding his throat mike. They had taken his phone, his knife, but hadn't noticed the earpiece shoved deep in his left ear or the thin sensors of the radio microphone taped over his larynx. It was sensitive enough to pick up the slightest subvocalized whisper.

As Aliza handed over the USB flash drive, stirring up excitement in the room, Tucker covered his mouth and whispered quiet commands.

K*ane hides in shadow, his heart thunders, his breathing pants quietly.*

He remembers the aching blasts, the screech of tires, the spew of oily exhaust. He wanted to run to his partner, to bark and howl and bite.

But he stays in shadow because that was what he was told.

Now new purpose fills his ear.

"RETRIEVE MY GUN. HIDE UNDER CAR."

He stares out of the darkness to the moonlit pavement, to the gun out there. He knows guns. He watched it slide under the car when his partner threw it. Then the car left. The gun stayed.

Kane shoots out of the darkness, gliding low. He scoops up the gun,

smelling smoke and fire and the whisper of his partner's sweat. He rushes back into darkness, into hiding, but he does not stop. He swerves on silent paws, diving back around. He races through the archway, drawn to the soft putter of a cooling engine, to the reek of burned oil—ready to slide beneath and wait.

But a growl comes from the left.

Shadows break out of the forest, the largest before him.

He has smelled the other dogs, along the road, upon the bushes, in the air. They marked this place as their own. He lowers the gun to the dirt. He recognizes the leader by his stiff-legged movements as he stalks forward in the slink of the shadows that share this space. This was their wild land, and they claimed it for themselves.

To help his partner, Kane must make it his own—if only for the night.

With a low growl, he leaps for the largest shadow.

The howl and wails of a savage dogfight echoed eerily through to the cottage. It sounded like something from a prehistoric epoch, full of blood, anger, and survival.

Tucker heard it through his earpiece, too.

Kane.

His heart clutched in fear.

Domonkos smiled, drawn by that chorus. He said something in Hungarian that made the one at the window laugh.

Csorba did not lift his face from a laptop he had pulled out of a briefcase. “Wild dogs,” he explained as he worked. “They make their home in this forgotten cemetery.”

No wonder no one had reacted to Kane’s earlier canvass of the place. To those here, he was just another shadowy cur skulking about.

“Dogs!” Csorba continued. “*That* is who you want to hand that great treasure over to, Jakob.”

Aliza’s father lifted his head enough to glare at the man. Father and daughter clutched hands together. Neither was deceived that they would survive.

“But men in power are more savage than dogs,” Csorba continued. “Give them that much gold, and it will fuel a firestorm of corruption and abuse. Many will die. It is better this way.”

Tucker had a hard time concentrating through the ongoing chorus

of growls and snarling barks—then suddenly the dogfight ended, as swiftly as it started. Holding his breath, he strained to listen for the outcome of that fight, but he heard nothing.

No panted breath, no snuffle, no soft pad of paw.

The continuous and reassuring presence of his dog had gone silent. Had the camera's audio gotten damaged or accidentally switched off during the fight?

Or was it something worse?

His heart pounded in his throat.

Kane . . .

Csorba rubbed his hands. "At last."

The screen of his laptop filled with an old map of this cemetery, one drawn by hand, even showing the brick archway.

The professor pointed to the screen. "Jakob discovered this map amid old papers that described an interment back in 1888. How gravediggers broke into a cave beneath this cemetery. The Hungarian landscape is full of such natural cavern systems. Even here under Budapest, over two hundred caves—big and small—are found right under our capital, most formed by the natural geothermic activity of this region."

Aliza stirred, her eyes widening. "The dying words of *Oberführer* Erhard Bock. That the stolen gold was *buried below where even the claws of the Jewish dead could reach it*. He was being literal, referring to a Jewish cemetery. *Below* a Jewish cemetery."

"How like a Nazi to bury his looted treasure in a Jewish cemetery," Csorba said. "Erhard Bock must have heard the stories about this small cemetery, one well away from the Jewish Quarter, and learned about the cave beneath it. After burying his treasure, he likely slew anyone who knew about it, removed all references to it, ensuring the secret would die with him if he wasn't able to retrieve it later."

Jakob lifted his head, speaking to his daughter. "But he never thought one of those old books would survive and make its way back to Budapest. Evil never thinks of everything."

Those last words were directed at Csorba, but they fell on deaf ears.

"Here we go," the professor said.

On the screen, modern satellite data began overlaying the old

hand-drawn map. The ground-penetrating radar was capable of discerning pockets deep beneath the earth: hidden cellars, bunkers, caves, even entire cavern systems. Upon the screen, topographic lines revealed the contour of the cemetery's surface, while darker splotches revealed hidden pockets below. In the upper left quadrant, an oily blotch grew distinct, underlying one of the graves marked on the map.

Csorba turned, his face glowing with excitement. "That's it!"

His eyes turned to Domonkos. "Gather your two men, along with hammers, crowbars, and flashlights. If the treasure is here, we'll have one night to empty it all into a truck and get it out of Budapest before anyone grows suspicious."

The big man pointed to Tucker, speaking in Hungarian.

Csorba nodded and answered.

Tucker turned to Aliza.

She explained, looking scared. "He says you look strong. That they might need extra muscle to break open the grave."

And likely it would become his own grave.

Csorba pointed to Aliza. "Tie her down. We will deal with them once we confirm that the treasure is here."

Aliza's wrists and ankles were quickly bound with plastic ties.

Once she was secure, Csorba lifted a small case, placed it on the desk, and opened it, revealing blocks of yellow-gray C-4 wired with blasting caps. He flicked a switch, and green lights lit up in a row.

Csorba turned, speaking in English, plainly for his prisoners' benefit. "This comes courtesy of colleagues of Domonkos at the Hungarian national security service." He lifted a wireless transmitter. "A small gift to help erase our handiwork here, while creating enough chaos to aid our escape out of Hungary."

His gaze fixed to Tucker as he pocketed the transmitter. "And for now, I believe, it shall serve as extra insurance in case you decide to try something foolish. With the press of a button, Aliza and Jakob will make this cemetery their final resting place."

Tucker was shoved toward the door and out into the night. After the brightness inside, the shrouded cemetery seemed infinitely darker. He searched around for Kane.

Had he made it under the sedan with the gun?

There was no way of knowing without looking. He tripped himself

and went sprawling flat on his belly, raising a guffaw from Domonkos. On the ground, Tucker searched beneath the sedan's undercarriage. It was dark, but he saw nothing there.

No sign of Kane.

A meaty hand grabbed him and hauled him up.

"There are hidden grave markers and stones littered across these fifteen acres," Csorba warned. "It would be easy to crack your head open. So you should best watch your step."

Tucker heard the veiled threat.

Csorba headed out, taking the lead, holding a flashlight in one hand and a handheld GPS in the other.

Tucker followed, trailed by the other men, across the overgrown cemetery. Ivy scabbled over every surface. Corkscrewed tendrils snagged at his jacket. Broken branches snapped like brittle bones underfoot.

All around, the flashlights danced over shadows and revealed greater threats than old markers on the ground. Yawning black pits began to open around them, half hidden by foliage or stripped over by vines, revealing collapsed or ransacked old tombs.

Threat or not, Tucker decided to take Csorba's words to heart and watched where he placed each foot.

The men chattered excitedly behind him in their native tongue, likely planning how to spend their share of \$92 million. The professor moved silently, contemplatively.

Tucker used the distraction to touch his throat mike and try radioing Kane.

Can you hear me, buddy?

K*ane crouches amid the shadowy pack.*

He bleeds, pants, and stares the others down.

None come forward to challenge. The one who first did slinks forward on his belly with a low whine of submission. His throat still bears the mark of Kane's fangs, but he lives, having known to submit to an opponent who outmatched him. He still reeks of urine and defeat.

Kane allows him to come forward now. They lick muzzles, and Kane permits him to stand, to take his place in the pack.

Afterward, Kane turns. The battle has carried him far from the car,

from the gun. As he stares, pondering what to do, a new command fills his ear.

“TRACK ME. BRING GUN. STAY HIDDEN.”

With this wild land now his, Kane heads back to where the fight began. He rushes silently through the woods, whispering through bushes, leaping darkness, dodging stone.

But it is not only the land that is his now.

Shadows ghost behind him.

He is not alone.

Csorba called out in Hungarian, holding out his GPS.

He had stopped near a flat-topped crypt raised a foot above the ground. Its surface was mostly obscured under a thick mat of leaf detritus and mulch, as if the earth were trying to swallow the tomb up.

Tucker was handed a hammer and a crowbar. He considered how best to use them to his advantage, but now the professor had a pistol in hand, pointed his way, plainly not planning on getting his own hands dirty. Plus the man still had the wireless transmitter in his pocket. Tucker remembered the frightened look on Aliza's face, the grief shining from her father's.

He could not fail them.

With no choice but to cooperate, Tucker worked with the others. Using hammers, they managed to loosen the lid. Once done, they all jammed crowbars into one side and cranked together on the slab of thick marble, as if trying to pry open a stubborn manhole cover. It seemed an impossible task—then, with a grating *pop* of stone, the lid suddenly lifted. An exhalation of sulfurous air escaped, like the brimstone breath of the devil.

One of the trio made a sign of the cross on his forehead, in some superstitious warding against evil.

The others made fun of this action, but only half-heartedly.

Afterward, with some effort, they pushed and shoved and worked the lid off the base of the crypt.

Csorba came forward with his flashlight and pointed the beam down. He swore happily in Hungarian. Cheers rose from the others.

Stone stairs led from the lip of the tomb and vanished into darkness

below.

They'd found the right tomb.

Orders were quickly made.

Tucker was forced to sit on the edge of another crypt, guarded at gunpoint by two of the men. Domonkos and Csorba, both with flashlights in hand, climbed down together to see what lay below, vanishing away, leaving only the glow of their lights shining eerily out of the open tomb.

With nothing to lose, Tucker sat with his arms behind his back, feigning full cooperation. As if mumbling to himself or praying, he subvocalized into the throat mike. "Kane. Keep hidden. Bring gun."

He held his palms open behind him and waited.

He breathed deeply to keep himself calm. He let his eyes drift closed.

C'mon, Kane . . .

One of the men yelped. He saw the man twirl pointing his pistol toward the woods. A low growl flowed from the forest, a shadow shifted to the left, twigs cracked. Other throats rumbled in the darkness, noise rising from all sides. More shadows shifted.

The two men spoke rapidly in Hungarian, their eyes huge.

It was the cemetery's pack of wild dogs.

Then Tucker felt something cold and wet touch the fingers behind his back. He jumped, startled. He hadn't heard a thing. He reached back there and found fur. Then something heavy was dropped into his palms.

The pistol.

"Good boy," he whispered under his breath. "Stay."

It seemed Kane had won over some friends.

Tucker gently placed the pistol on the tomb behind him. Using the ongoing distraction, he reached blindly back to Kane to investigate the audio glitch. He didn't want to be cut off from his partner any longer.

Especially not now.

He needed this link more than ever.

He toggled the camera off, then on again, rebooting it, praying that was enough.

A moment later, a satisfying squelch of static in his left ear meant all was right with the world.

“All done, Kane. Go back and hide with your friends.”

All he heard as Kane retreated was the softest scrape of nail on marble. Within another minute, the forest went quiet again, the pack vanishing into the night.

The two guards shook off their fear, laughing brusquely now that the threat seemed to have backed off, sure they had intimidated the pack away.

As Tucker listened to the soft pant of Kane in his ear, he slipped the pistol into his belt and hid it under the fall of his jacket.

And not a moment too soon.

A shout rose from the open crypt. The light grew brighter. Then Domonkos's pocked face appeared and barked new orders, smiling broadly. Tucker could almost see the sheen of gold in his eyes.

Had they actually found the stolen treasure?

Tucker was forced to his feet and made to follow Domonkos down into the crypt. He guessed they needed as many able-bodied men as possible to haul up the treasure from below. Tucker mounted the steps, trailed by the other two men.

The narrow stairs descended from walls made of brick to a tunnel chiseled out of natural stone. He lost count at a hundred steps. Conversation had died down as they descended, stifled by the weight of stone above and the dreams of riches below. Soon all Tucker heard was the men breathing around him, their echoing footfalls, and somewhere far below the drip of water.

Good.

At last, the end of the staircase appeared, lit by the glow from Csorba's flashlight.

Reaching the cavern, Domonkos entered ahead of them, sweeping his arm to encompass the space as if welcoming them to his home. He found his voice again and chattered happily to his comrades.

Tucker took a few steps into the space, awed by the natural vault, dripping with water, feathered with thick capes of flowstone and spiked above by stalactites. Tucker wondered how many Jewish slaves *Oberführer* Erhard Bock had worked to death to tunnel into this secret cavern, how many others had died to keep its secret—and as he stared over at Csorba, he wondered how this Jewish scholar could so blithely discount his own heritage and prepare to steal gold soaked in his

ancestors' own blood.

Csorba stood next to a stack of crates, each a cubic foot in size and emblazoned with a swastika burned into the wood. He had broken one open, pulled down from the top of the pile. Hundreds of gold ingots, each the size of a stick of butter, spilled across the floor.

Csorba turned, wide-eyed.

He spoke to the others, who all cheered.

He even shared the news with Tucker.

"Erhard Bock lied," he said, awe filling his voice. "There are not thirty-six crates here. There are over *eighty*!"

Tucker calculated in his head. That equaled over \$200 million.

Not a bad haul if you don't mind murdering some innocent cemetery caretakers, a kindly university professor, his daughter—not to mention yours truly. And who knows how many more?

He'd heard and seen enough.

He slipped out his pistol, raised it, and shot three times.

Three head shots.

Three bodies fell. The last was Domonkos, who sank with the most bewildered expression on his face.

He couldn't bring all four back to the surface by himself.

Too risky.

But he could bring one, the man behind all of this.

Csorba stumbled into the crate and yanked his wireless detonator out of his pocket. "Another step and I'll press it."

To see if he'd actually do it, Tucker took that step and another. He saw the man's thumb tremble on the button.

Then, with a wince, Csorba finally pressed it. "I . . . I warned you."

"I didn't hear any explosion," Tucker said. "Did you?"

Csorba pressed it several more times.

Tucker closed the distance, plucked the useless detonator out of his grip, turned it off, and pocketed it. He waved his pistol toward the steps.

"I don't understand . . ." the professor mumbled as he obeyed.

Tucker didn't bother to explain. Once he got hold of the pistol from Kane, he could have shot Domonkos and his two cronies up top, but he feared that if Csorba heard gunfire he might panic and do what he just did—press the transmitter.

So Tucker had to come down here to be certain.

A quarter of the way along the steps, he had lost his wireless connection to Kane. That panting in his ear had died away again. So he was confident Csorba's transmitter, buried four times deeper, would be equally useless—only after knowing that for sure by coming down here did he feel it safe enough to act.

They finally reached the top of the crypt.

Csorba tried to bolt for the forest.

"Kane, stop him."

Folding out of the woods, a shadow blocked the professor's path, growling, eyes shining in the dark. Others materialized, closing in from all sides, filling the night with a low rumble, like thunder beyond the horizon.

Csorba backpedaled in fright, tripped over a stone, and fell headlong into one of the open graves. A loud *thud* followed, accompanied by a worrisome *snap*.

Tucker hurried forward and stared into the hole. The professor lay six feet down, his neck twisted askew, unmoving. Tucker shook his head. It seemed the ghosts of this place weren't going to let this man escape so easily.

Around him, the dark shadows faded back into the forest, vanishing upon some unspoken signal, until only the whisper of leaves in the wind remained.

Kane came slinking up, fearful he had done wrong.

Tucker knelt and brought his friend's face close to his. "Who's a good boy?"

Kane reached and touched a cold nose against his.

"That's right. You are."

Half an hour later, Tucker sat in the sedan with the broken headlamp, the engine idling. He had freed Aliza and her father and told them all that had happened. He was going to leave it to them to explain as best they could to the authorities, leaving his name out.

Aliza leaned her face through the open window.

"Thank you." She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Are you sure you don't want to stay? If only for another night."

He heard the offer behind her words, but he knew how

complicated things would become if he did stay. He had two hundred million reasons why it was time for him to go.

“What about a reward?” she asked.

He pictured Csorba falling into his own grave, snapping his neck.

“There’s too much blood on that gold,” he said. “But if there’s any spare change, I know of some hungry dogs that share this forest. They could use food, a warm place to lay their head at night, a family to love them.”

“I’ll make it happen,” she promised. “But aren’t those things what we all want?”

Tucker looked at the stretch of open road beyond the brick archway.

Maybe some day, but not today.

“Good-bye, Aliza.”

He revved the engine.

Kane’s tail thumped heavily on the seat next to him, his head stuck full out the window. As Tucker gunned the engine, a howl burst from his partner, an earsplitting call, singing to his own blood.

The sedan shot forward and barreled out the archway.

Behind them, the forest erupted with a chorus of yowls and wails, echoing up into the night and chasing them out into the world.

As they raced away, the wind blew brochures around the car’s interior. It seemed the prior owner had been dreaming of faraway trips, too, ways to spend that gold.

One landed against the windshield and became plastered there crookedly.

The photo depicted palm trees and sandy white beaches.

Its exotic name conjured up another time, a land of mystery and mythology.

Zanzibar.

Tucker grinned, and Kane wagged his tail.

Yeah, that’ll do.

So ends this adventure with Tucker and Kane—but a larger one looms ahead for the pair as they reach Zanzibar in a novel titled *Bloodline*. A fateful crossing with Commander Pierce of Sigma Force will cast them into an adventure spanning the globe, one that will reveal a frightening scientific truth about the nature of mankind: *That immortals are walking among us today.*

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Throughout history, conspiracy theories abound. It is only human nature. We are forever looking for patterns amid chaos, for signs of the invisible puppeteer manipulating the grand scheme of lives, governments, and the path of mankind. Some of these shadowy plotters are cast as villains; others as great benefactors. Some of these secret cabals are based on historical facts; others are mere fanciful fictions; and yet even more are a Gordian knot of the two, woven so inexplicably together that the line between fact and fiction becomes a tangled tapestry of false history.

And for no other organization in history has this stood truer than the infamous Knights Templar.

In the early twelfth century, the order began as a group of nine knights, who swore to protect pilgrims on their way to and from the Holy Lands. From those humble beginnings, a great order would eventually grow in both wealth and power and spread across Europe until even popes and kings feared them. Then, on October 13, 1307, the king of France and the current pope conspired to arrest and disband the order, claiming great atrocities had been committed by the knights, including heresy. In the aftermath of that purge, legends and myths blurred the true fate of the order: stories of lost treasures abounded; tales spread of knights escaping persecution to arrive on the shores of the New World; and some reports even claim that the order still exists today, in secret and under guard, protecting a power that could reshape the world.

But let's set aside such speculations and mythologies and go back to those original *nine* knights. What many do not know is that those nine founding members were all related by blood or marriage, arising from a single family. Eight of them are recorded by name in historical documents. The ninth remains a mystery and a source of much speculation today by historians. Who was this mysterious founding member of an order that would grow in such prominence in history and legend? Why was this last knight never named as plainly as the others?

The answer to that mystery is the beginning of a great adventure.

Notes from the Scientific Record

On February 21, 2011, the cover of *Time* magazine declared: *2045, The Year Man Becomes Immortal*. At face value, that might seem a wild claim, but other scientists have made similar statements. Dr. Ronald Klatz, in his book *Advances in Anti-Age Medicine*, wrote:

Within the next fifty years or so, assuming an individual can avoid becoming the victim of major trauma or homicide, it is entirely possible that he or she will be able to live virtually forever.

We are living in an exciting time when advances in medicine, genetics, technology, and a myriad of other disciplines are opening the newest frontier for mankind: *eternity*.

How will that manifest, what form will it take? Within these pages, you'll discover that answer. The concepts raised in this novel are based on facts, on exhaustive research, going back to studies done by Soviet scientists during the Cold War. But before you turn to that first page, I must make one correction concerning the startling statements made above. They are, in fact, far too *conservative* in their estimates.

For not only is immortality within our reach—it is *already here*.

Summer 1134

Summer 1134

Holy Lands

They once called her a witch and a whore.

But no longer.

She sat astride a gray destrier as the black-armored warhorse stepped gingerly through the carnage of battle. Bodies littered the fields ahead, Muslim and Christian alike. Her passage stirred the feasting crows and ravens, chasing them up into great black clouds in her wake. Other scavengers—those on two legs—picked through the dead, pulling off boots, yanking out arrows for their points and feathers. A few faces lifted to stare, then quickly turned away again.

She knew what they saw, another knight among the many who fought here. Her breasts were hidden under a padded habergeon and a hauberk of mail. Her dark hair, cropped to her shoulders, shorter than most men's, lay under a conical helmet; her fine features further obscured by a nasal bar. Strapped to the side of her saddle, a double-edged broadsword bumped against her left knee, ringing off the mail chausses that protected her long legs.

Only a few knew she was not a man—and *none* knew she held secrets far darker than her hidden gender.

Her squire waited for her at the edge of a rutted road. The path wound steeply up to an isolated stone keep. The hulking structure, hidden deep within the Naphtali Mountains of Galilee, had no name

and looked as if it had been carved out of the hill itself. Beyond its battlements, the red sun sat low on the horizon, obscured by the smoke from campfires and torched fields.

The young squire dropped to a knee as she drew her horse to a halt beside him.

“Is he still there?” she asked.

A nod. Frightened. “Lord Godefroy awaits you ahead.”

Her squire refused to look in the direction of the stone-crowned keep. She had no such reluctance. She tilted her helmet up to get a better view.

At long last . . .

She had spent sixteen years—going back to when her uncle founded the Order of the Poor Knights of the Temple of Jerusalem—searching for the impossible. Even her uncle did not understand her request to join the Templars, but her side of the family would not be refused. So she had been given the white mantle of the order and folded in among the original nine, hidden away, as faceless as the helmet she wore, while the order grew around her both in number and prominence.

Others of her family, of her bloodline, continued to manipulate the knightly order from within and without: gathering wealth and knowledge, searching for powerful relics from lost crypts and ancient crèches across Egypt and the Holy Lands. Despite their best planning, they’d certainly had their failures. Just a year ago, they’d missed acquiring the bones of the magi—the relics of the three biblical kings, said to hold the secrets to lost alchemies.

She would not let today mark another failure.

With a snap of the reins, she urged her horse up the rocky path. With each passing step, the number of dead grew as the guardians of the keep put up a final and futile struggle to withstand the assault. Reaching the summit of the hill, she found the gates to the keep broken and splintered, battered apart by a massive steel-shod ram.

A pair of knights guarded the way forward. Both nodded to her. The younger of the two, fresh to the order, had sewn a crimson cross over his heart. Other Templars had begun to take up the same habit, a symbol to mark their willingness to shed their own blood for the cause. The grizzled and pocked older warrior simply wore the

traditional white surcoat over his armor, like herself. The only decoration upon their mantles was the crimson blood of the slain.

“Godefroy awaits you in the crypt,” the older knight said and pointed beyond the gates to the inner citadel.

She led her destrier through the ruins of the gate and quickly dismounted with a flourish of her mantle. She left her broadsword with her mount, knowing she had no fear of being ambushed by some lone surviving protector of the keep. Lord Godefroy, for all his troubles, was thorough. As testament to his diligence, all across the open courtyard, wooden pikes bore the heads of the last defenders. Their decapitated remains piled like so much firewood along a back wall.

The battle was over.

Only the spoils remained.

She reached a door that opened to shadows. A narrow stair, rough-hewn and cut from the stone of the mountain, led down beneath the keep. The distant orange-red flicker of a torch marked the end of the steps far below. She descended, her footfalls hurrying only at the last.

Could it be true? After so many years . . .

She burst into a long chamber, lined to either side by stone sarcophagi, well over a score of them. Sweeping through, she barely noted the Egyptian writing, lines of symbols hinting at dark mysteries going back before Christ. Ahead, two figures stood bathed in torchlight at the rear of the chamber: one standing, the other on his knees, leaning on a staff to hold himself upright.

She crossed toward them, noting that the last sarcophagus had been pried open, its stone lid cracked on the floor beside it. It seemed somebody had already begun looking for the treasure hidden here. But the violated crypt held nothing but ash and what appeared to be bits of dried leaf and stem.

The disappointment showed on Lord Godefroy’s face as she approached the pair. “So you come at last,” he said with false cheer.

She ignored the knight. He stood a head taller than she did, though he shared the same black hair and aquiline nose, marking their common ancestry out of southern France, their families distantly related.

She dropped to her knees and stared into the face of the prisoner.

His features were tanned to a burnished shade, his skin smooth as supple leather. From under a fall of dark hair, black eyes stared back at her, reflecting the torchlight. Though on his knees, he showed no fear, only a deep welling of sadness that made her want to slap him.

Godefroy drew down beside her, intending to interfere, to try to ingratiate himself into what he must have sensed was of great importance. And though he was one of the few who knew her true identity, he knew nothing of her deeper secrets.

“My lady . . .” he started.

The eyes of the prisoner narrowed at the revelation, fixing her with a harder stare. All trace of sadness drained away, leaving behind a flicker of fear—but it quickly vanished.

Curious . . . does he know of our bloodline, our secrets?

Godefroy interrupted her reverie and continued, “Upon your instructions, we’ve spent many lives and spilled much blood to find this place hidden by rumor and guarded as much by curses as by infidels—all to find this man and the treasure he guards. Who is he? I have earned such knowledge upon the point of my sword.”

She did not waste words on fools. She spoke instead to the prisoner, using an ancient dialect of Arabic. “When were you born?”

Those eyes bore into her, even pushing her back by the sheer force of his will, a buffeting wind of inner strength. He seemed to be judging whether to offer her a lie, but from whatever he found in her face, he recognized the futility of it.

When he spoke, his words were soft but came from a place of great weight. “I was born in Muharram in the Hijri year five-and-ninety.”

Godefroy understood enough Arabic to scoff. “The year ninety-five? That would make him over a thousand years old.”

“No,” she said, more to herself than him, calculating in her head. “His people use a different accounting of years than we do, starting when their prophet Muhammad arrived in Mecca.”

“So the man here is not a thousand years old?”

“Not at all,” she said, finishing the conversion in her head. “He’s only lived *five hundred and twenty* years.”

From the corner of her eye, she noted Godefroy turn toward her, aghast.

“Impossible,” he said with a tremulous quaver that betrayed the

shallow depth of his disbelief.

She never broke from the prisoner's gaze. Within those eyes, she sensed an unfathomable, frightening knowledge. She tried to picture all he had witnessed over the centuries: mighty empires rising and falling, cities thrusting out of the sands only to be worn back down by the ages. How much could he reveal of ancient mysteries and lost histories?

But she was not here to press questions upon him.

And she doubted he would answer them anyway.

Not this man—if he could still be called a *man*.

When next he spoke, it came with a warning, his fingers tightening on his staff. "The world is not ready for what you seek. It is forbidden."

She refused to back down. "That is not for you to decide. If a man is fierce enough to grasp it, then it is his right to claim and possess it."

He stared back at her, his gaze drifting to her chest, to what was hidden beneath hard armor. "So Eve herself believed in the Garden of Eden when she listened to the snake and stole from the Tree of Knowledge."

"Ah," she sighed, leaning closer. "You mistake me. I am not Eve. And it is not the Tree of *Knowledge* I seek—but the Tree of *Life*."

Slipping a dagger from her belt, she quickly stood and drove the blade to its hilt under the prisoner's jaw, lifting him off his knees with her strength of will. In that single thrust, the endless march of centuries came to a bloody halt—along with the danger he posed.

Godefroy gasped, stepping back. "But is this not the man you came so far to find?"

She yanked free the dagger, spraying blood, and kicked the body away. She caught the staff before it fell free from the prisoner's slack fingers.

"It was not the man I sought," she said, "but what he carried."

Godefroy stared at the length of olive wood in her hand. Fresh blood flowed in rivulets down its surface, revealing a faint carving along its length: an intricate weave of serpents and vines, curling around and around the shaft.

"What is it?" the knight asked, his eyes wide.

She faced him fully for the first time—and drove her blade into his

left eye. He had seen too much to live. As he fell to his knees, his body wracking itself to death in ghastly heaves upon her dagger's point, she answered his last question, her fingers firm on the ancient wooden rod.

“Behold the Bachal Isu,” she whispered to the centuries to come. “Wielded by Moses, carried by David, and borne by the King of Kings, here is the staff of Jesus Christ.”

Fourth of July

Fourth of July:

Five days from now

The assassin stared through the rifle's scope and lowered the crosshairs to the profile of President James T. Gant. He double-checked his range—seven hundred yards—and fixed the main targeting chevron of the USMC M40A3 sniper rifle upon the occipital bone behind the man's left ear, knowing a shot there would do the most damage. Festive music and bright laughter from the holiday picnic filtered through his earpiece. He let it all fade into the background as he concentrated on his target, on his mission.

In U.S. history, three presidents had died on the exact same day, on July 4, on the birthday of this country. It seemed beyond mere chance.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Monroe.

Today would mark the fourth.

Steadying his breath, Commander Gray Pierce pulled the trigger.

FIRST

Present Day

June 30, 11:44 A.M. EST
Takoma Park, Maryland

Gray Pierce pulled into the driveway with a coughing growl of the 1960 Thunderbird's V-8 engine.

He felt like growling himself.

"I thought the plan was to sell this place?" Kenny asked.

Gray's younger brother sat in the passenger seat, his head half out the window, staring up at the craftsman bungalow with the wraparound wooden porch and overhanging gable. It was their family home.

"Not any longer," Gray answered. "And don't mention any of that to Dad. His dementia makes him paranoid enough."

"How is that different from any other day . . . ?" Kenny mumbled sourly under his breath.

Gray glowered at his brother. He'd picked Kenny up at Dulles after a cross-country flight from Northern California. His brother's eyes were red-rimmed from jet lag—or maybe from too many small bottles of gin in first class. At this moment, Kenny reminded Gray of their father, especially with the pall of alcohol on his breath.

He caught his own reflection in the rearview mirror as he pulled the vintage Thunderbird into the family garage. While the two brothers both shared the same ruddy Welsh complexion and dark hair as their father, Gray kept his hair cropped short; Kenny had his tied in

a short ponytail that looked too young even for someone still in his late twenties. To make matters worse, he also wore cargo shorts and a loose T-shirt with the logo of a surfing company. Kenny was a software engineer for a company in Palo Alto, and apparently this was his version of business attire.

Gray climbed out of the car, trying his best to push back his irritation with his brother. On the ride here, Kenny had spent the entire time on his cell phone, dealing with business on the other coast. He'd barely shared a word, relegating Gray to the role of chauffeur.

It's not like I don't have my own business to attend, too.

For the past month, Gray had put his life on hold, dealing with the aftermath of the death of their mother and the continuing mental decline of their father. Kenny had come out for the funeral, promising to spend a week helping to get their affairs in order, but after two days, a business emergency drew him back across the country, and everything got dumped back on Gray's shoulders. In some ways, it would have been easier if Kenny had not bothered coming out at all. In his wake, he'd left a disheveled mess of insurance forms and probate paperwork for Gray to clean up.

That changed today.

After a long, heated call, Kenny had agreed to come out at this critical juncture. With their father suffering from advancing Alzheimer's, the sudden death of his wife sent him into a downward spiral. He'd spent the past three weeks in a memory-care unit, but he'd come home last night. And during this transition, Gray needed an extra pair of hands. Kenny had accumulated enough vacation time to be able to come out for a full two weeks. Gray intended to hold him to it this time.

Gray had taken a month off from work himself and was due back at Sigma headquarters in a week. Before that, he needed a few days of downtime to get his own house in order. That's where Kenny came in.

His brother hauled his luggage out of the convertible's trunk, slammed the lid, but kept his palm on the chrome bumper. "And what about Dad's car? We might as well sell it. It's not like he can drive it."

Gray pocketed the keys. The classic Thunderbird—raven black with a red leather interior—was his father's pride and joy. The man had gone to painstaking ends to restore it: tricking it out with a new Holly

carburetor, a flame-thrower coil, and an electric choke.

“It stays,” he said. “According to Dad’s neurologist, it’s important to keep his environment as stable and consistent as possible, to maintain a familiar routine. Besides, even if he can’t drive it, it’ll give him something to tinker with.”

Before Kenny could figure out what else to sell of his father’s belongings, Gray headed toward the door. He didn’t bother to offer to carry his brother’s luggage. He’d had enough baggage to deal with lately.

But Kenny wasn’t done. “If we’re supposed to keep everything the same—to pretend nothing’s changed—then what am I doing here?”

Gray swung toward him, balling a fist and tempted to use it. “Because you’re still his son—and it’s high time you acted like it.”

Kenny stared him down. Anger burned in his brother’s eyes, further reminding Gray of their father. He’d seen that fury all too often in his dad, especially of late, a belligerence born of dementia and fear. Not that such anger was new. His father had always been a hard man, a former oil worker out of Texas until an industrial accident took most of his left leg and all of his pride, turning an oilman into a housewife. Raising two boys while his spouse went to work had been hard on him. To compensate, he had run the household like a boot camp. And Gray, as stubborn as his father, had always pushed the envelope, a born rebel. Until at last, at eighteen years of age, he had simply packed his bags and joined the army.

It was his mother who finally drew them all back together, the proverbial glue of the family.

And now she was gone.

What were they to do without her?

Kenny finally hauled up his bag, shouldered past Gray, and mumbled words he knew would cut like rusted barbed wire: “At least I didn’t get Mom killed.”

A month ago, that gut-punch would have dropped Gray to his knees. But after mandatory psychiatric sessions—not that he hadn’t missed a few—his brother’s accusation only left him iron-hard, momentarily rooted in place. A booby trap meant for Gray had taken out his mother. *Collateral damage* was the phrase the psychiatrist had used, seeking to blunt the guilt.

But the funeral had been a closed casket.

Even now, he could not face that pain head-on. The only thing that kept him putting one foot in front of the other was the determination to expose and destroy the shadowy organization behind that cold-blooded murder.

And that's what he did: he turned and took one step, then another.

It was all he could do for now.

10:58 P.M. SCT

Off the Seychelles archipelago

Something woke her in the night aboard the anchored yacht.

Instinctively, Amanda slid a hand over her swollen belly, taking immediate personal inventory. Had it been a cramp? In her third trimester, that was always her first worry, a maternal reflex to protect her unborn child. But she felt nothing painful in her abdomen, just the usual pressure on her bladder.

Still, after two miscarriages, the panicky flutter in her heart refused to calm. She tried to reassure herself that the other two babies—a boy and a girl—had been lost during her *first* trimester.

I'm crossing my thirty-sixth week. Everything is fine.

She lifted up an elbow. Her husband snored softly beside her on the queen-size bed in the yacht's main stateroom, his dark skin so stark against the white satin pillow. She took comfort in Mack's muscular presence, in the masculine bruise of black stubble across his cheek and chin. He was her Michelangelo *David* chiseled out of black granite. Yet, she could not escape the twinge of unease as her finger hovered over his bare shoulder, hesitant to wake him but wanting those strong arms around her.

Her parents—whose aristocratic family went back generations in the Old South—had only approved the marriage with the strained graciousness of modern sensibilities. But in the end, the union served the family. She was blond and blue-eyed, raised in the world of cotillions and privilege; he was black-haired and dark of skin and eye, hardened by a rough childhood on the streets of Atlanta. The unlikely couple became a poster child for familial tolerance, trotted out when

needed. But that poster of a happy family was missing one key element: a child.

After a year of failing to conceive—due to an issue with her husband’s fertility—they’d resorted to in vitro fertilization with donor sperm. On the third try, after two miscarriages, they’d finally had success.

Her palm found her belly again, protective.

A boy.

And that’s when the trouble had begun. A week ago, she had received a cryptic note, warning her to flee, not to tell anyone in her family. The letter hinted at *why*, but offered only a few details, yet it was enough to convince her to run.

A loud thump echoed down from the deck overhead. She sat upright, ears straining.

Her husband rolled onto his back, rubbing an eye blearily. “What is it, babe?”

She shook her head and held up a palm to quiet him. They’d taken such precautions, covering every step. They’d chartered a series of private aircraft under a chain of falsified papers and itineraries, landing a week ago on the other side of the world, at an airstrip on the tiny island of Assumption, part of the archipelago of the Seychelles. Hours after landing, they’d immediately set out in a private yacht, sailing amid the chain of islands that spread out in an emerald arc across the azure seas. She had wanted to be isolated, far from prying eyes—yet close enough to the Seychelles’ capital city of Victoria in case there was any trouble with the pregnancy.

Since arriving, only the captain and his two crew-members had ever seen their faces, and none of them knew their true names.

It seemed the perfect plan.

Muffled voices reached her. She could not make out any words, but heard the harsh threat—then a gunshot, as bright and loud as the strike of a cymbal.

It set her heart to pounding.

Not now. Not when we’re this close.

Mack burst out of the sheets, wearing only his boxers. “Amanda, stay here!” He pulled open the top drawer of the bedside table and hauled out a large black automatic pistol, his service weapon from his

years as a Charleston police officer. He pointed to the rear of the stateroom. "Hide in the bathroom."

Amanda gained her feet, bloodless and weak with terror, wobbling under the weight of her gravid belly.

Mack dashed to the door, checked the peephole. Satisfied, he opened the door enough to slip out and closed it silently behind him—but not before giving one last command. "Lock it."

Amanda obeyed, then searched the room for any weapon at all. She settled for a small knife used to carve the fresh fruit placed in their cabin each morning. The handle was still sticky from papaya juice. With blade in hand, she retreated to the bathroom but stopped at the threshold. She could not go inside. She refused to be trapped inside such a tight space. The tiny stateroom's head could not contain the enormity of her fear.

More gun blasts rang out—amid shouts and curses.

She sank to her knees, clutching the knife with one hand, supporting her belly with the other. Her anxiety reached the child inside. She felt a small kick.

"I won't let them hurt you," she whispered to her boy.

Overhead, footsteps pounded back and forth.

She stared upward, trying to pierce through the floors to the starlit deck. What was happening? How many were up there?

Then a furtive scrabbling sounded at her door—followed by a faint knock.

She hurried forward and placed an eye to the peephole. Mack nodded back at her, then glanced quickly back up the passageway. Had he found a way off the yacht—or out of desperation simply come back to defend her?

With numb fingers, she fumbled the lock open and began to pull the door, only to have it kicked wide. She stumbled back in shock. A tall, bare-chested black man stalked into the room—but it wasn't Mack.

He held Mack's head in his right hand, gripping it by the throat. Shiny blood poured down his forearm from the severed neck. In his other hand, he clutched an equally bloody machete. He smiled widely, showing white teeth like a shark, plainly amused by his joke.

She retreated in horror, forgetting her tiny blade.

Another figure stepped around the monster. A pale man in a perfectly tailored white suit. The only color to him was his black hair and a thin mustache above even thinner lips. He was tall enough that he had to bow himself into the room. He also smiled, but apologetically, as if embarrassed by the exuberance of his companion.

He spoke a few sharp words in some African dialect, clearly chastising his companion.

With a shrug, the other tossed her husband's head upon the bed.

"It's time to go," the suited man ordered her in a genteel British accent, as if inviting her to a party.

She refused to move—couldn't move.

The Brit sighed and motioned to his companion.

He came forward, roughly grabbed her elbow, and dragged her out the door. The Brit followed them across the short passageway and up the ladder to the stern deck.

There, she found only more horror and chaos.

The captain and his two crewmates, along with a pair of the assailants, lay sprawled in pools of blood. The attackers had been shot; the yacht's crew hacked, dismembered by the sheer force of the brutality.

The surviving assailants gathered atop the deck or off in a scarred boat tied to the starboard rail. A handful scoured the yacht, hauling out cases of wine, bagfuls of supplies, stripping anything of value. They were all black-skinned, some bearing tribal scarring, many no older than boys. Weapons bristled among them: rusty machetes, antique-looking automatic rifles, and countless pistols.

Pirates.

Under the moonlight, freshened by the evening's southeasterly trade winds, her mind cleared enough to allow despair and bitter guilt to creep in. Out here in the Seychelles, she had thought they were far enough away from the Horn of Africa to be safe from the modern-day pirates who hunted those waters.

A dreadful mistake.

She was shoved toward the moored boat, accompanied by the Brit. She had read somewhere in her father's briefings about how a few European expatriates had taken to aiding and financing the profitable new industry of piracy.

She stared at the British man, wondering how he had managed to avoid getting a single drop of blood on his pristine suit amid all this carnage.

He must have noted her attention and turned to her as they reached the starboard rail.

“What do you want with me?” she asked, fixing him with a hard stare, suddenly glad that all the papers aboard hid her true identity. “I’m nobody.”

The Brit’s gaze lowered from her steely resolve—but not out of shame or remorse. “It is not *you* we want.” He stared at her belly. “It’s your baby.”

7:00 P.M. EST

Takoma Park, Maryland

Balancing a bag of groceries on his hip, Gray pulled open the screened back door to his family’s home. The smell of a baking pie, rich in cinnamon, struck him first. On his way back from the gym, he got a text from Kenny to fetch some French vanilla ice cream and a few other odds and ends needed for tonight’s dinner—the first family dinner since the tragic loss of their mother.

A glance at the stove revealed a large pot of bubbling Bolognese sauce; by the sink, a drying bowl of spaghetti in a strainer. A hissing pop drew his gaze back to the pot. Only now did he note the vigorous boil to the sauce. Unattended and forgotten, red sauce roiled over the lip, dribbled down the sides, and sizzled into the gas burner.

Something was wrong.

That was confirmed when a loud bellow erupted from the next room: “*WHERE’S MY KEYS!*”

Gray dropped the groceries on the counter, turned off the stovetop, and headed to the living room.

“*SOMEONE’S STEALING MY CAR!*”

Passing through the dining room, Gray joined the fracas in the living room. Overstuffed furniture was positioned around a central stone hearth, cold and dark at the moment. His father looked skeletal in the recliner by the picture window. He’d once filled that same seat,

commanding the room. Now he was a frail shadow of his former self.

Still, he remained strong. He attempted to push out of the chair, but Kenny held down his shoulders. He was assisted by a petite woman with a brownish-gray bob, dressed in blue scrubs. Down on one knee, she held his father's hand and urged him to be calm.

Mary Benning was an R.N. at the hospital's memory-care unit. During his stay there, his father had taken a shine to her. Gray was able to hire her away, to serve as a night nurse here at the house, to be on hand when his father had the most trouble. The plan had been for Kenny to keep an eye on Dad during the day, until Gray and Mary could interview and hire a day nurse to cover a full twenty-four-hour shift. It would be expensive, but Director Crowe had arranged adequate compensation, a death benefit, to help cover the costs and keep Gray's father in his own house.

"Harriet! Let me go!" His father yanked his hand free of Mary's, coming close to elbowing Kenny in the nose.

The nurse kept a hand on his knee and gave it a squeeze of reassurance. "Jack, it's me. Mary."

His eyes found hers, a confused look passed over his face, then he sagged as memory washed back over him.

Mary glanced at Gray. "Your father caught you pulling up with the groceries. Saw the Thunderbird. Just got a little panicked and confused. He'll be fine."

Kenny straightened, a stricken look on his face. He'd not really seen Dad get like this before. Shook up, he stumbled away.

The motion drew his father's attention. His eyes got huge. "Kenny, what're you doing here?"

Kenny didn't know what to say, still stunned by the Swiss cheese that was his father's memory.

Mary covered for him, not hiding the truth, only patting his knee. "Jack, he's been here all day."

His father searched their faces, then leaned back in his chair. "Oh, yeah, that's right . . . I remember . . ."

But did he? Or was he only acquiescing in an attempt to feign normalcy?

Kenny shared a glance with Gray, glassy with shock.

Welcome to my world.

"I'd better get back to finishing your dinner," Mary said, standing and dusting off her knee.

"And I'd better finish unpacking," Kenny said, seeking a hasty retreat.

"Good idea and wash up," his father ordered with an echo of his former bluster. "Your room's up—"

"I haven't forgotten where it is," Kenny cut him off, blind to the callousness of such a remark to someone suffering from Alzheimer's.

But his dad merely nodded, satisfied.

As Kenny stepped away, his father finally seemed to notice Gray standing there. The confusion on his face faded, but a stab of old anger took its place. It had taken his father almost two weeks to finally acknowledge and ultimately remember the death of his wife, so, to his mind, the wound was still raw. He also knew the source of that loss. *That* he always remembered. There had been many bad days in the intervening weeks, but what could either of them do? No words could bring her back.

A knock at the door startled them all. Gray tensed, expecting the worst.

Kenny, already headed to the front stairs, opened the door.

A lithe figure stood out on the porch, dressed in black leather and a loose motorcycle jacket over a maroon blouse. She carried a helmet under one arm.

The gloominess of the day lifted at the sight of her as Gray headed to the door. "Seichan, what are you doing here?"

His father interrupted. "Don't leave the lady standing on the stoop, Kenny!" He waved the visitor inside. He might be losing his memory, but he knew a handsome woman when one landed on his doorstep.

"Thank you, Mr. Pierce." Seichan entered, slipping inside, moving with the leonine grace of a jungle cat, all sinew, muscles, and long curves. She cast an appraising glance toward Kenny as she stepped past him—whatever she saw there, she found lacking.

Her eyes found Gray's face next and visibly hardened—not in anger, more like protection. They'd barely spoken since they'd shared a kiss and a promise three weeks ago. The pledge was not a romantic one, only the assurance that she'd work alongside him to expose those who had a hand in his mother's murder.

Still, Gray remembered the softening of those lips.

Was there more to that promise, something yet unspoken?

Before he could dwell on it further, his father pointed to the table.

“We’re just about to sit down to dinner. Why don’t you join us?”

“That’s very kind,” Seichan said stiffly, “but I won’t be staying long. I just need a word with your son.”

Those almond-shaped eyes—marking her Eurasian heritage—fixed on Gray with plain intent.

Something was up.

Seichan was a former assassin for the same shadowy group responsible for his mother’s death, an international criminal organization called the Guild. Its real identity and purpose remained unknown, even to its own agents. The organization operated through individual cells around the world, each running independently, none having the complete picture. Seichan had eventually turned against it, recruited by Director Crowe to serve as a double agent until her subterfuge was exposed. Now—hunted both by her former employers and by foreign intelligence agencies for her past crimes—she was Gray’s partner and his responsibility.

And maybe something more.

Gray stepped close to her. “What’s up?”

She kept her voice low. “I got a call from Director Crowe. Came straight here. There’s been a kidnapping off the Seychelles by Somali pirates. A high-value American target. Painter wanted to know if you were up for a mission.”

Gray frowned. Why was Sigma involved with a simple kidnapping? There were plenty of policing and maritime agencies that could attend to such a crime. Sigma Force—made up of Special Forces soldiers who had been retrained in various scientific disciplines—was a covert wing for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Sigma teams were sent out into the world to protect against global threats, not to address the kidnapping of a single American.

Seichan must have read the suspicion in his face. Her eyes bore into his. She plainly knew more but was unable to speak freely in front of the others. Something big was happening. The realization set his heart to beating harder.

“The matter is time sensitive,” she added. “If you’re coming, there’s

a jet already fueling, and Kowalski is on his way to pick us up. We can swing by your apartment on the way out. Otherwise, we'll be briefed en route."

Gray glanced at the chair by the cold hearth. His father overheard their talk, his gaze fixed to his son's face.

"Go," his father said. "Do your job. I've got enough help here."

Gray took comfort in that gruff permission, praying it represented some small measure of forgiveness by his father. But his next words, spoken with a harsh bitterness, dashed such hope.

"Besides, the less I see of your face right now . . . the better."

Gray backed a step. Seichan took his elbow, as if ready to catch him. But it was the heat of her palm, more than anything, that steadied him, the reassurance of human contact—like that kiss weeks ago.

Mary had stepped into the room, drying her hands on a towel. She'd also heard those harsh words and gave Gray a sympathetic look. "I've got things covered here. You take some time for yourself."

He silently thanked her and allowed Seichan to guide him toward the door. Gray felt the need to share some parting farewell with his father. The desire burned painfully in his chest, but he had no words to voice it.

Before he knew it, he found himself out on the front porch. He halted at the top step and took in a deep, shuddering breath.

"Are you okay?" Seichan asked.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll have to be."

Still, she continued to search his face, as if seeking a truer answer.

Before she could find it, the squeal of rubber on the pavement announced the arrival of his transportation. They both turned as a black SUV came to a hard stop. The window rolled down, allowing a pall of cigar smoke to waft out. The shaved head of a gorilla followed, chewing on a stump of a stogie.

"You coming or what?" Kowalski called hoarsely.

As much as the man aggravated him, Gray had never been happier to see his brutish teammate. He headed down the steps, only to have Kenny come rushing out after him, blocking his way.

"You can't leave now. What am I supposed to do?"

Gray pointed back at the house. "It's your turn. What do you think

I've been doing all this time?"

He shoved past his sputtering brother and crossed toward the waiting SUV and Seichan's parked motorcycle.

She kept beside him, slipping on her helmet.

"Who else has been assigned to us?" he asked.

"We've been ordered to pick up another two teammates, local assets already in the region, with unique skills to help us on this mission."

"Who are they?"

She offered a ghost of a smile as she snapped down her helmet's visor. Her words echoed out from inside, darkly amused.

"I hope you've had your rabies shots."

July 1, 6:32 P.M. East Africa Time
Republic of Tanzania

The low growl warned him.

Already on edge, Tucker Wayne flattened against the brick wall of the narrow street and slid into the deeper shadows of a doorway. An hour ago, he noticed someone following him, watching from afar. He had managed to lose the tail quickly in the labyrinth of alleyways and crooked streets that made up this crumbling section of Zanzibar.

Who had found him?

He pressed his back against a carved wooden door. He intended to stay lost, undiscoverable. He had been adrift in the world for the past three years, now one year shy of his thirtieth birthday. Two weeks ago, he had reached the archipelago of Zanzibar, a string of sun-baked islands off the eastern coast of Africa. The name alone—*Zanzibar*—conjured up another time, a land of mystery and mythology. It was a place to disappear, to live unseen, and where few questions were asked.

People knew better than to be curious.

Still, he often drew second glances here, not because he was white. The ancient port of Zanzibar remained the crossroads for people of every race and color. And after a full year traveling through Africa, his skin was burned as dark as that of any of the local merchants hawking wares in the spice markets of old Stone Town. And he certainly struck

a tall figure, muscular—more quarterback than linebacker—though there remained a hardness to his eyes that made any curious glance toward him skirt quickly away.

Instead, what attracted the most attention to him was something else, someone else. Kane brushed up against his thigh—silent now, with hackles still raised. Tucker rested a hand on his dog's side, not to calm him but ready to signal his partner if necessary. And that's what they were. *Partners*. Kane was an extension of himself, a disembodied limb.

While the dog looked like a hard-bodied, compact German shepherd, he was actually a Belgian shepherd dog, called a Malinois. His fur was black and tan, but mostly black, a match to his dark eyes. Under his palm, Tucker felt Kane's muscles tense.

Half a block away, a thin shape burst around the next corner, careening in a panic. In his haste, he collided off the far wall and rebounded down the street, glancing frequently over his shoulder. Tucker sized him up in a breath and weighed any danger.

Early twenties, maybe late teens, a mix of Asian and Indian, his eyes wide with terror, his limbs and face sickly gaunt—from addiction, from malnourishment?

The runner clutched his right side, failing to stanch a crimson bloom from seeping through his white shift. The scent of fresh blood must have alerted Kane, along with the panicked tread of those bare feet.

Tucker prepared to step out of the shadowed doorway, to go to the young man's aid—but the pressure against his legs increased, pinning him in place.

A heartbeat later, the reason became clear. Around the same corner stalked a trio of large men, African, with tribal tattoos across their faces. They carried machetes and spread to either side of the empty street with the clear skill of experienced hunters.

Their target also noted their arrival—igniting his already frightened flight into a full rout—but blood loss and exhaustion had taken their toll. Within a few steps, the victim tripped and sprawled headlong across the street. Though he struck the cobbles hard, he didn't make a sound, not a whimper or a cry, simply defeated.

That, more than anything, drew Tucker out of hiding.

That, and something his grandfather had drilled into him: *In the face of inhumanity, a good man reacts—but a great one acts.*

Tucker tapped three fingers against his dog's side, the signal plain. Defend.

Kane leaped over the prone body of the young man and landed in a crouch on the far side, tail high, teeth bared, growling. The shepherd's sudden appearance caused all three attackers to stop in shock, as if some demon djinn had materialized before them.

Tucker used the distraction to fold out of the shadows and close upon the nearest of the three men. In a swift capture of wrist, followed by an elbow strike to the chin, the machete ended up in Tucker's grip. He flat-handed the man away as the second assailant wielded his blade in a roundhouse swing. Rather than leaping clear, Tucker lunged forward, entering the man's guard. He caught the deadly arm under his own and snaked his hand fully around the limb and immobilized it. With his other arm, he slammed the butt-end of the steel machete into the man's nose.

Bone cracked; blood spurted.

The man went limp, but Tucker held him upright by his trapped arm.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the third and largest opponent back away two steps and free a pistol. Tucker swung around, using his captured assailant's body as a shield as shots rang out. It proved a meager defense at such close range. One of the rounds blasted through his captive's neck, grazing Tucker's shoulder.

Then a scream bellowed.

Tucker shoved the body aside and saw Kane latched onto the shooter's wrist, the dog's fangs digging deep. The pistol clattered to the street. The man's eyes were round with panic as he tried to shake the shepherd loose. Blood and slather flew.

Only then did the huge African remember the machete in his other hand. He lifted it high, ready to hack at the dog.

"Release!" Tucker cried out.

The command was barely off his lips when Kane obeyed, letting go and dropping back on the street. But the man continued his downward swing at the dog's neck with a savage bellow. Kane could not get out of the way in time.

Tucker was already moving.

Heart pounding, he dove for the abandoned pistol and scooped it up. He shoulder-rolled to bring the weapon up—but he was too slow.

The machete flashed in the sunlight.

A gunshot *cracked* loudly.

The man crumpled backward, half his skull shattering away. The blade flew away harmlessly. Tucker stared at his pistol. The shot had *not* come from his weapon.

Up the street, a new trio appeared. Two men and a woman. Though dressed in street clothes, they all had the stamp of military about them. The leader in the center held a smoking SIG Sauer.

“See to him.” He pointed to the bleeding young man on the ground. His voice had a slight Texas accent. “Get him to a local hospital and we’ll rendezvous back at the evac point.”

Despite the concern about the injured man, the leader’s gaze never unlocked from Tucker’s eyes. From the hard contours of his face, the close-cropped black hair that had gone a bit lanky, and the stony edge to his storm-gray eyes, he was definitely military.

Likely *ex-military*.

Not good.

The leader crossed over to him, ignoring Kane’s wary growl. He offered a hand to help Tucker up.

“You’re a difficult man to find, Captain Wayne.”

Tucker bit back any surprise and ignored the offered hand. He stood on his own. “You were the ones following me. Earlier this morning.”

“And you lost us.” A hard twinkle of amusement brightened the man’s eyes. “Not an easy thing to do. That alone proves you’re the man we need.”

“Not interested.”

He turned, but the man stepped in front of him and blocked the way. A finger pointed at his chest, which only managed to irritate him further.

“Listen for one minute,” the man said, “then you’re free to go.”

Tucker stared down at the finger. The only reason he didn’t reach out and break it was that the man had saved Kane’s life a moment ago. He owed him that much—and perhaps even a minute of his time.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The offending finger turned into an open palm, inviting a handshake. “Commander Gray Pierce. I work for an organization called Sigma.”

Tucker scowled. “Never heard of it. That makes you what? Defense contractors, mercenaries?” He made his disdain for that last word plain.

That dark twinkle grew brighter as the other lowered his arm. “No. We work under the auspices of DARPA.”

Tucker frowned, but curiosity kept him listening. DARPA was the Defense Department’s research-and-development administration. What the hell was going on here?

“Perhaps we can discuss this in a quieter location,” the commander said.

By now, the man’s partners had gathered up the wounded young man, shouldered him between them, and were headed down the street. Faces had begun to peer out of windows or to peek from behind cracked-open doors. Other figures hovered at the corners. Zanzibar often turned a blind eye to most offenses, but the gunfire and bloodshed would not be ignored for long. As soon as they left, the bodies would be looted of anything of value, and any inquiries would be met with blank stares.

“I know a place,” Tucker said and led the way.

6:44 P.M.

Gray sipped a hot tea spiced with cardamom. He sat with Tucker Wayne on a rooftop deck overlooking the Indian Ocean. Across the waters, the triangular sails of old wooden dhows mixed with cargo ships and a smattering of tourist yachts. For the moment, they had the hotel’s tiny restaurant to themselves.

At the foot of the building, a small spice market rang and bustled, wafting up with a mélange of nutmeg, cinnamon, vanilla, cloves, and countless other spices that had once lured sultans to this island and had fueled an active slave-trading industry. The island had exchanged hands many times, which was evident in its unique blend of Moorish,

Middle Eastern, Indian, and African traditions. Around every corner, the city changed faces and remained impossible to categorize.

The same could be said for the stranger who was seated across the narrow table from him. Gray placed his cup of tea onto a cracked saucer. A heavy-bodied fly, drawn by the sweet tea, came lumbering down and landed on the table. It crawled toward his cup.

Gray swatted at it—but before his palm could strike the table, fingers caught his wrist, stopping him.

“Don’t,” Tucker said, then gently waved the fly off before returning to his thousand-yard stare out to sea.

Gray rubbed his wrist and watched the fly, oblivious to its salvation, buzz lazily away.

Tucker finally cleared his throat. “What do you want with me?”

Gray focused back on the matter at hand. He had read the former army ranger’s dossier en route to the Horn of Africa. Tucker was a superb dog handler, testing through the roof in regards to emotional empathy, which helped him bond with his subjects, sometimes too deeply. A psych evaluation attributed such a response to early-childhood trauma. Raised in North Dakota, he had been orphaned when his parents had been killed by a drunk driver when he was a toddler, leaving him in the care of his grandfather, who had a heart attack when Tucker was thirteen. From there, he’d been dumped into foster care until he petitioned for early emancipation at seventeen and joined the armed services. With such a chaotic, unstable upbringing, he seemed to have developed an affinity for animals more than humans.

Still, Gray sensed there was more to the man than just psychiatric evaluations and test scores. At his core, he remained a mystery. Like *why* he had abruptly left the service, disappearing immediately after being discharged, leaving behind a uniform full of medals, including a Purple Heart, earned after one of the nastiest firefights in Afghanistan—Operation Anaconda at Takur Ghar.

Gray cut to the chase as time was running out. “Captain Wayne, during your military career, your expertise was extraction and rescue. Your commanding officer claimed there was none better.”

The man shrugged.

“You and your dog—”

“Kane,” Tucker interrupted. “His name’s Kane.”

A furry left ear pricked at his master’s voice. The small shepherd lay sprawled on the floor, looking drowsy, inattentive, but Gray knew better. His muzzle rested against the toe of Tucker’s boot, ready for any signal from his partner. Gray had read Kane’s dossier, too. The military war dog had a vocabulary of a thousand words, along with the knowledge of a hundred hand gestures. The two were bound together more intimately than any husband and wife—and together, with the dog’s heightened senses and ability to maneuver in places where men could not, the two were frighteningly efficient in the field.

Gray needed that expertise.

“There’s a mission,” he said. “You would be well paid.”

“Sorry. There’s not enough gold in Fort Knox.”

Gray had prepared for this attitude, readied for this eventuality. “Perhaps not, but when you left the service, you stole government property.”

Tucker faced him, his eyes going diamond-hard. In that gaze, Gray read the necessity to speak warily, to play the one card he had with great care.

Gray continued, “It costs hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless man-hours to train a war-service dog.” He dared not even glance toward Kane; he kept his gaze fixed on Tucker.

“Those were *my* man-hours,” Tucker answered darkly. “I trained both Kane and Abel. And look what happened to Abel. This time around, it wasn’t Kane who killed Abel.”

Gray had read the brutal details in the files and avoided that minefield. “Still, Kane is government property, military hardware, a skilled combat tracker. Complete this mission and he is yours to keep, free and clear.”

Disgust curled a corner of Tucker’s lip. “No one owns Kane, commander. Not the U.S. government. Not Special Forces. Not even me.”

“Understood, but that’s our offer.”

Tucker glared at him for a long breath—then abruptly leaned back, crossing his arms, his posture plain. He was not agreeing, only willing to listen. “Again. What do you need me for?”

“An extraction. A rescue.”

“Where?”

“In Somalia.”

“Who?”

Gray sized up his opponent. The detail he was about to reveal was known only to a handful of people high in the government. It had shocked him when he'd first learned the truth. If word should somehow reach her captors—

“Who?” Tucker pressed.

Kane must have sensed his partner's growing agitation and let out a low rumble, voicing his own complaint.

Gray answered them both. “We need your help in rescuing the president's daughter.”

About the Author

JAMES ROLLINS is the *New York Times* bestselling author of international thrillers, translated into more than forty languages. His Sigma series has been lauded as one of the “top crowd pleasers” (*New York Times*) and one of the “hottest summer reads” (People Magazine). In each novel, acclaimed for its originality, Rollins unveils unseen worlds, scientific breakthroughs, and historical secrets—and he does it all at breakneck speed and with stunning insight.

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